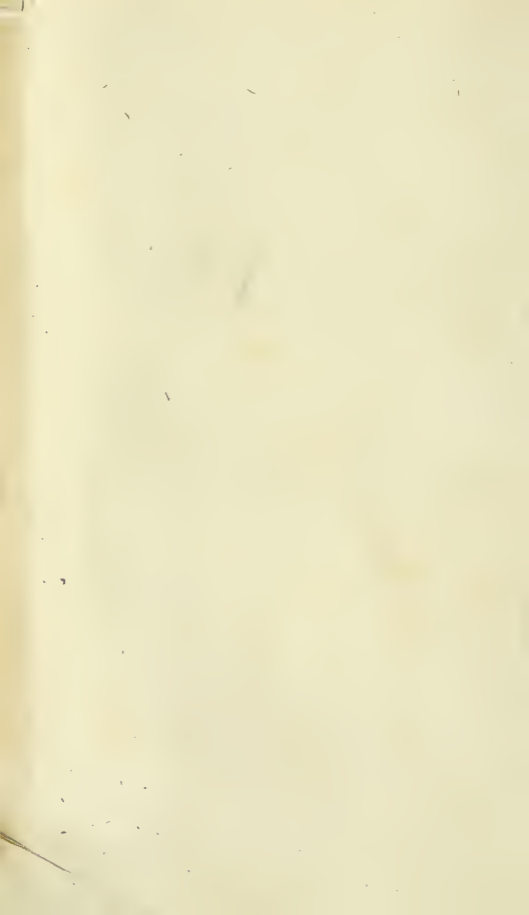


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DR J. H. MURRAY

ON

SPELLING REFORM

From the Annual Address (1880) of the President of the Philological Society.

While traditional scholarship clings to traditional absurdity, science says if we would understand the structure and history of any language, we must first find out what that language ("tongue-action") actually was, what were the living utterances of which the symbols *cado cecidi*, 'Ιησοῦ *Icsu* were merely the pictures? And satisfied with nothing short of this, science has a favorable regard for every improvement by which the symbols can be made with greater clearness and certainty to convey the living facts.

Moreover, the discovery of the value of popular and unwritten dialects—specimens of language in its natural living form—in revealing the processes of speech-formation and growth. in operation around us, and the impossibility of recording or conveying to any one these dialect facts and phenomena without a minute analysis of sounds, and an accurate notation as its instrument, have made *phonetic*, that is to say *truthful*, notation absolutely necessary to every student of language. And so philologists who once, according to their lights,¹ looked askance at proposals to alter the spellings of words which in their "picturesque irregularities" spoke to them of the dilapidations of centuries, have come to see that it is only *truthful* representation which can hand down true history, and to sympathise with all attempts (the difficulties of which they certainly know better than any one else) to extend this truthful representation to existing languages.

1. See the "light" of five-and-twenty years ago, in the tone in which phonetic spelling is depreciated by our own colleague, Archbishop Trench, in his "English Past and Present," Lecture viii., a chapter which, in the interests of science as well as of education, we hope to see cancelled, if not reversed, by the author in a new edition.

How this has been already done in Dutch and Spanish is well known. Within the last year also some practical steps have been taken with regard to German. As every one knows, German is exceedingly well represented in writing, almost every symbol or combination of symbols having a fixed value, so that there is hardly any difficulty in *reading* the written language. But there are several cases in which the same sound has several signs, so that *spelling* is by no means so certain; and this is the imperfection for the removal of which German scholars are now exerting themselves.

In the United States the question has been practically raised in connection with the large number of illiterate persons revealed by the Census, and the realisation of the exorbitant proportion of the learning time of youth that is spent in the mere mastery of the clumsy tool of the current spelling. Our American cousins are above all practical; moreover, they wish to have their whole people educated as highly as possible: they have no dread of "over-educating the masses," and making them "unfit for their position;" and the question of how to do this with the greatest economy of time has become an intensely practical one; on all hands the cry is that the radical evil is in the writing itself, which ought to be made regular and phonetic. The philologists have concurred in this feeling, and an Association has been formed to devise a satisfactory spelling with an extended alphabet, as well as to suggest such partial changes in the right direction as may be immediately put in practice. Several of the State Legislatures have taken the matter up, and it does not require much prescience to see that, whether England does so or not, the Americans will ere long adopt an amended spelling. And as the United States will possess before the end of this century a population of one hundred millions, and be the centre of gravity of the English-speaking world, it is clear that their action in this matter is big with issues for the English of the future.

But England is stirring, in a slow, lumberly, and timorous fashion. Here also the matter has become a practical one in connection with education, and the waste of national resources incurred in the attempt to make child after child commit to memory the 20,000 contradictory facts of our present spelling. You are aware of the memorial presented to the Education Department by 130 School Boards praying for a Royal Commission in the matter, of the action of the Social Science Association in passing resolutions in favor of reformation, and in especial of the use of an alternative spelling for the purposes of instruction, and of the formation of a Spelling Reform Association to advance the movement. The Association has recently made a collection of proposed schemes of Spelling Reform, as a

first step, it may be presumed, towards uniting suffrages, if possible, in favour of that which seems most practicable.

My own opinion is that, at present and for a long time to come, until indeed the general principles of phonography are understood by men of education, no complete or systematic scheme of Spelling Reform has the least chance of being adopted in this country, and I do not think that the promulgation or advocacy of such bears any practical fruit. I wish it were otherwise, but we must look at facts and existing conditions, and at the lessons of experience. And the latter seem to me to afford abundant proof that partial and progressive reforms in accordance with well-established existing analogies can be introduced and carried through. The whole history of written language is the record of such gradual and partial reformation. We know for instance what was done about 1500 by the systematic application of *ea* and *ee* to distinguish two sounds formerly both expressed by long *e*, and the analogous adoption of *oa* and *oo* for the two sounds of long *o*. And the slightest glance at the orthography of Shakspeare, Bunyan, or a Bible of the seventeenth century, will show even the most ignorant² what an immense amount of spelling reform has been done since then. Thus, to take at random a single instance, *Ps.* 106, (48 verses) as printed in 1611, differs in 116 spellings from that printed in 1879, and the first chapter of Genesis as now printed differs in 135 spellings from the *same version* as printed in 1611. One hundred and thirty-five differences in 31 verses! though the same version word for word. Yet there are people—some certainly fools only, but some I fear knaves—who, when spelling reform is mentioned, shriek, “You are going to alter our language! Keep your uncircumcised hands off the language of Milton, and Shakspeare, and our English Bible!” the fools not knowing, and the knaves pretending not to know, that the spelling in which they read these works is already a greatly re-formed spelling, though in more points than one “improved very much the wrong way.” Indeed, one of the most important spelling-reforms accomplished in English, which practically resulted in the addition of another letter to the alphabet³ was made about 1630; I refer to the

2. Even the leader-writers in the daily papers, some of whom have lately been playing the blind leader of the blind to perfection on this point. Witness the reckless plunges of a writer in the *Daily News* of 10th September, 1880, and his horror of “being cut adrift from Shakspeare, and Milton, and Dryden, and Swift, and Burke, under penalty of seeing the words of these authors transmuted into jargon.” As a regular reader of the *Daily News*, who was ashamed of the paper that day, I should contribute to a fund to present the editorial staff with a facsimile of the *first folio*, or even of Mr Furnivall’s *quartos*, so as to keep them within hailing distance of Shakspeare’s own “jargon” (if that be the penny-a-linish for “different spelling” from which they are already so adrift without knowing it.

3. For *v* and *u* were up to that date only forms of the same letter having a position-rank, like long *f* and short *s*.

reform in the use of *u* and *v*, whereby, in opposition to the usage of all past ages, *u* was made a vowel, and *v* a consonant, so that "Reuiue vs, saue vs from euil, leaue vs not vnto our selues" was changed to "Revive us, save us from evil, leave us not unto ourselves." It is to be regretted that in thus making *v* a consonant, the silent and thenceforth useless ⁴ *e* which followed the old *u* in *leaue*, *haue*, *liue*, etc., was not dropped; and still more that in the subsequent simplification of the form of *f*, *s*, one of the forms should have been entirely rejected, instead of being economised, as in *u*, *v*, for one of the sounds of *s*, or used as a character for *sh*. But all these instances show that partial reform, even such as largely alters the familiar appearance of a word, as "*salver*" for "*saluer*," has been, and may again be, accomplished; and I am convinced that if a well-considered series of such partial reforms were prepared and recommended in successive stages to the public, a great deal might be done, not merely to remove the most glaring anomalies in the spelling at present current, but to prepare the public mind ultimately for the consistent application of phonetic principles.

It seems to me, therefore, that the Philological Society, representing the English scholarship of the country, might very properly respond to the numerous appeals made to it from Britain and America, to make some declaration on the subject, by preparing and issuing a list of amended spellings recommended for use instead of those at present employed. Mr. Sweet is now engaged on a work which gives him special facilities of comparing whole classes of symphonic words with each other and their earlier forms; and I think the Society might usefully ask him to prepare and submit to us a list of the words, the spelling of which might, with advantage, be altered. In any such first list I would confine the alterations almost entirely to the omission of such letters as are both unphonetic and unhistoric, and for which no so-called etymological plea can be submitted; including also a few words of which an older form, familiar to all students of English literature, might well be substituted for the baser one at present current.

For example, let us recommend the uniform dropping of final or inflexional silent *e*, where it does not serve the now recognised function of lengthening a vowel, writing, *heav*, *hears*, *heavd*, *hav*, *selvs* (cf. the pair *self*, *selvs*, with *wife*, *wives*, and the consequent simplification of grammar rules), *liv*, *livs*, *livd* (thus distinguished from *live*, *lives*, *heros*, *potatos* (like *zeros*, *tomatos*), *cleard* (like *clears*), *eatn* (like *torn*), *fastn* (so distinct from *hāsten*), *showd*

4. Up to that time it had a meaning, giving the spelling-rule, "*u* final is a vowel, but *u* before a vowel is a consonant;" when the consonant was written *v*, the following *e* was no longer needed to distinguish it.

pairing with *shown*, *praid*, *plaid*, as already in *laid*, *lain*. Along with these let us recommend the restoration of the historical -*t* after breath consonants, which printers during the past century have industriously perverted to -*ed*, writing *feteht*, *blusht*, *pickt*, *drest*, *winkt*, like Shakspeare, and Herbert, and Milton, and Addison, and as we actually do in *lost*, *past*, *left*, *felt*, *meant*, *burnt*, *blest*, *taught*. *Laughed*, for *laught*, is not a whit less monstrous than *taughed*, *soughed*, would be for *taught*, *sought*; nor is *worked* for *workt* less odious than *wroughed* would be for *wrought*. The use of double consonants ought to be regulated, and such bad spellings as *traveller*, and *reveller*, which seem to rhyme with *propeller*, corrected to Shakspeare's *traveler*, *reveler*. With final *e*, *ue* also ought to be discarded in *demagog*, *catalog*, where it is equally false to etymology and phonology; and of course the final -*e* in words like *doctrin* (cf. *Latin*), *favorit* (cf. *merit*), *facil* (cf. *civil*). The termination of the agent -*our* should be uniformly levelled to -*or* (which is Old French), as already done in so many words like *author*, *doctor*, *senator*, *orator* (all of which are adoptions from French, *not* from Latin). Where this termination has an English verb to support it, there would indeed be good reason to write it -*er*, as in *sailer*, *vender*, *acter*. The combination *ea*, when it has the sound of *ĕ* short, might always be written *e*, as in *welth*, *helth*, *red* (pa. t. like *led*, *sped*). *sted*, *ded*, *dremt* (cf. *feel*, *felt*, *dream*, *dremt*), for though some of these accidentally answer to O.E. *ea*, they were all *e* in Middle English, and *ea* which they have now is a relic of the spelling reform of the beginning of the sixteenth century, when M.E. *ĕ* was split up into *ea* and *ee*. Now that so many have gone back to a sound which then as now would have been written with *e*, simple *e* ought to be restored. In the same way *friend* would become *frend*; and indeed all the long *iez* might take the *ee* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as *feeld*, *pecee*, *cheef*, *beleev*, and the same with *ei* in *conceev*, *receev*; in none of these is the *i* original as regards English. The M.E. *o*, a mere temporary *pisaller* for historical *u* before *u* (= *v*) *m*, *n*, (⁵) is an expedient no longer needed, so that *sum*, *cum*, *tung*, *luv*, *abuv*, *wun*, *wunder*, *wunt*, could be restored to their native English form (O.E. *sum* *cum*, *tunge*, *lufe*, *abufe*, *wunnen*, *wundor*, *wunod*), before Norman cacographers spelled them with *o*. Where *o* has passed into the sound of *oo*, it was so written in 1611, and ought to be so again in *moov*, *proov* (like *proof*), *behoov*, (*behoof*); we already write *groove*. Add to these, which are some of the obvious points to be

5. The similarity in MS. of *u* and *n*, and of *uu* to *un*, *nu*, *mi*, *im*, etc., gave rise to the writing rule, "Never use *u* before *u* (= *v*), *n*, *m*, but make a shift with the next nearest vowel *o*." Hence when O.E. *dufa* became M.E. *duve* (*duue*), the rule necessitated its being written *douc*, but sounded *dūve*. The genuine modern form is *duv*. In *coney* for *cuni*, and sometimes in *wont* (*fwunt*), *behoove* (*behūve*), this has corrupted the pronunciation and changed the word.

corrected at once, a more extended use of *z* in the body of words, as *chozen*, like *frozen*, *praise*, *raize*, like *blaze*, *glaze*, *graze*, (cf. *glass*, *glaze*, *grass*, *graze*,) without at present touching on the inflexional *-s*, *leaves*, *ways*, *grows*, which does not present a serious practical difficulty, and the correction of some of the worst individual monstrosities, as *foreign*, *sovereign*, *scent*, *island*, *scythe*, *rhyme*, *scissors*, *ache*, *debt*, *doubt*, *people*, *parliament*, *court*, *would*, *sceptic* (foren, sovren, sent, ilaud, sythe, rime, cisors or sisors (etymol. *cisos*, Fr. *ciseaux*), ake, det, dout, peple, parlament, cort, woud, skeptic (cf. *skeleton*), and we should have a fair beginning which science could support, and only prejudice—yet, alas! how great that *only*—could oppose.

I think that if a list of corrections following these principles generally were prepared and offered to the public on the authority of the Philological Society, it would soon commend itself in whole or part to the common sense of Englishmen; its adoption would cure a number of the worst of our present deformities, and, what is far more important, it would recall men to a consideration of the natural function of spelling, breaking down the prevalent delusion that the current fashion of symbolising a word is the *word* itself, whose identity is to be preserved at any cost, however the "pronunciation," as the real word is amusingly called, may change; recalling people to the fact that the spelling of any word is not a dogmatic, but a practical question, and encouraging them to discuss it practically, so as to arrive at the best solution and so secure greater improvements in the future. Such a list would probably also secure the adhesion of the philologists of America, who have already recommended for immediate adoption some of the points which I have mentioned, and thus preserve unity among the ranks of those who aim at a perfectly written English of the future.

I need hardly add that my Dictionary experience has already shown me that the ordinary appeals to Etymology against spelling reform utterly break down upon examination. The etymological information supposed to be enshrined in the current spelling is sapped at its very foundation by the fact that it is, in sober fact, oftener wrong than right, that it is oftener the fancies of pedants or sciolists of the Renaissance, or monkish etymologers of still earlier times, that are thus preserved, than the truth which alone is *ετυμολογία*. From the fourteenth century onwards, a fashion swept over French and English of refashioning the spelling of words over the Latin ones, with which rightly or wrongly they were supposed to be connected; and to such an extent has this gone that it is, in nine cases out of ten, now impossible, without actual investigation, to form any correct opinion upon the history of these words—the very thing which the current spelling is supposed to tell us. The real history is recovered only by marshalling the phonetic spellings of earlier

days, as the Philological Society's Dictionary will enable everyone to do, piercing through the mendacious spellings of later times to the phonetic facts which they conceal or falsify, and thus reaching a genuine *ἔτυμολογία*. The traditional and pseudo-etymological spellings of the last few centuries are the direst foes with which genuine etymology has to contend; they are the very curse of the etymologist's labor, the thorns and thistles which everywhere choke the golden grain of truth, and afford satisfaction only to the braying asses which think them as good as wheat. Who could tell from *Almoner*, that the word was an adoption of the O. Fr. *aumonier*, that on English soil it developed as *aumoner*, *aumener*, *aumner*, *amner*; that this regular form of the sixteenth century was laid hold of by the pedants, and refurbished as *almner*, *almener*, to its present form, and that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was "etymologically spelled" as *almosner*, *aulmosiner*, *amosner*, *almoiner*, *almoigner*, *almoigner*, and in ten other wonderful ways? What true history is contained in a series like *armarium*, *armarie*, *almarie* (by differentiation from following *r*, like *peregrinum*, *pelegrino*, *pilgrim*), *almerie*, *aulmerie*, *aumerie* (like *falta*, *faulte*, *faute*), *aumry*, *aumbry* (like *slumcre*, *slumber*), *ambry*, (like *chaunt*, *chant*), and how much would be lost had it been constantly written *armary* or *almerly*, as we actually sometimes see it! If anyone would see how "etymological" spelling has attacked a devoted word, let him look at the spellings of the word *Ambassador*, introduced in the fifteenth century as *Embassadour*, and becoming with retraction of accent in sixteenth century *embassador*, *embassader*, but which appears also with the artificial spellings after Fr., It., Sp., and med. Lat., as *ambassiatour*, *ambassatour*, *ambassadour*, *ambassador*, *ambassiadour*, *ambaxatour*, *embassatour*, *embassitour*, *embasitour*, *embassetour*, *embassitour*, *embassytour*, *embasetore*, *embassatour*, *inbassetour*, *embasiatour*, *embasseatoure*, *embassytor*, *embassitour* (*e*), *imbassitor*, *imbassotor*, *imbassator*, *imbasodor*; of which *ambaxatour* is the most etymological (coming nearest to mid. Lat. *ambactiator*, *ambaxiator*, and *embassader* the most truly English. The inconsistency of the current *ambassador* side by side with *embassy*, and *embassage*, is obvious.

Ever since men began to copy and to translate, there has been a tendency to imitation of the spelling of earlier times or of earlier languages; the principle that "the spelling shows the word" cannot, since 1400 at least, be practically affirmed of any one spelling: rather is it true that the word can be deduced from the many spellings which since that period have been used at the same time for almost every word. Spelling has regularly lagged behind pronunciation, for the obvious reason that as the latter changed, it took time for each change to be recognised as legitimate and respectable, and men went on writing the old form of the word, while they heard around them, and perhaps themselves

used, even while repudiating, the new.⁶ With the very best spelling it seems to me that this would happen still; and a consideration of it as one of the practical conditions of all writing helps us to define in some measure the extent to which phonetics ought to be practically applied. Spelling will always lag a certain way behind actual speech, especially the careless, lawless speech of familiar conversation. In my opinion, therefore, it is futile to aim at representing this in practical spelling; let us aim at providing a means of spelling what men *mean* to say, *aim* at saying, and in measured or formal speech or song *do* say, not at the shortcomings which, though inseparable from speech, are none the less unintentional, and to be discouraged. Every system of writing, except one on a purely physiological basis, like Mr. Melville Bell's Visible Speech, must be not merely conventional, but even to some extent inconsistently conventional; we shall do well if we can arrive at the stage of writing English in a way that shall practically represent the ideal of speech to which all educated Englishmen approximate, though none may reach it, and which is as far removed from the slurred or imperfect utterance of the average Londoner (which seems to be the cynosure that attracts some authors of proposed systems), as it is from the archaic or even semi-foreign pronunciation of distant provinces. This bears I think upon such matters as the representation of the obscure and unaccented vowels; in this especially I would refer with approbation to the early phonetic work of Mr Ellis, and to the principle still maintained by Mr Pitman (though I differ from him in several of its applications) of writing the sounds which educated men aim at producing, not at those which men in a hurry actually succeed in producing. If the reader aim at the former, he may be trusted always to reach the latter; if he aim only at the latter, he will soon fall short even of them, and want a still newer spelling for his still more defective utterances. But I have said enough to commend the question of spelling reform to the careful consideration of the Society, as well as to indicate my own opinion of its useful extent, and of the best means of introducing it.

6. The great variety of spelling which one finds in every century has somewhat altered my opinions on some of the minutiae of English phonology. I should not talk so certainly as once I might have done, on what was the *real* M.E. form of any word; nor would place so much weight as my friend Mr Sweet for instance might do on the dialectal value of *æ* instead of *e* in a word, or on the importance of any isolated spelling. Of course men tried to write phonetically, but we need not suppose that their efforts were very much more successful than those of ordinary men trying to do the same now; and at all times it is apparent that men thought of the sense first and the sound after; and that they had no scruple to sacrifice exact phonetism, if they could thereby express their sense more distinctly.

